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AUTHOR Drake, Sarah E.; Vontz, Thomas S.

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ABSTRACT

This ERIC digest addresses (1) the constitutional foundations of the U.S. presidency, (2) how the role of chief executive has changed through the years, and (3) Internet resources for teaching about the U.S. presidency. The digest discusses the Philadelphia Convention (1787), dominant issues guiding the creation of the chief executive's role, checks and balances, federal versus states' rights, and executive authority. The document lists four Internet resources with annotations. (BB)

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Teaching about the U.S. Presidency

By Sarah E. Drake and Thomas S. Vontz

Many consider the U.S. presidency to be the most powerful office in the world. What are its constitutional foundations? How has the role of the chief executive changed through the years? What World Wide Web resources are available for teaching about the U.S. presidency?

Constitutional Foundations of the Presidency. The delegates to the 1787 Philadelphia Convention, who framed the U.S. Constitution, brought with them various conceptions of executive power. Three questions dominated the framers' consideration of the role the executive would play in the new government. First, the delegates discussed whether the executive should be a single individual or whether multiple persons should share the office. Second, they considered at length the amount of power the executive should wield. And third, they debated the best means by which to elect the executive. Generally, deliberations on these questions involved the balance of power in the new government.

The framers feared that a powerful executive could usurp legislative authority and engage in tyrannical actions. The weak executives created by the state constitutions, however, proved unable to prevent state legislatures from trampling on the people's rights. The founding fathers sought to create a government in which, as James Madison explained in *Federalist 51*, "Ambition must be made to counteract ambition." Madison deemed a balance of power necessary, and he called for a governmental arrangement in which it would be in the best interest of all citizens to resist executive encroachment.

Although they recognized the importance of strong leadership, Americans feared executive tyranny. To guard against the creation of an authoritarian monarchy, many delegates called for a plural executive. Advocates of a plural executive believed that vesting presidential power in more than one man would lessen the danger that leaders would abuse power. When the Pennsylvania delegate James Wilson moved on June 1, 1787 that the executive should consist of one person, a lengthy silence ensued. The framers eventually decided upon a single executive. They decided this on the basis that conflicts would be more easily avoided if there were only one executive. Also, they believed that Congress could more carefully watch and check a single executive.

The length of the president's term and the method of election were also contested issues. The delegates initially agreed that the president would serve a seven-year term and would be ineligible for reelection. After much debate, they decided a bicameral Congress would elect the executive. On July 26, the Convention presented its decisions to the Committee of Detail, which was charged with the task of organizing the resolutions into a constitutional draft. Of the five members of the Committee of Detail, only Nathaniel Gorham advocated executive authority. As a result, the Committee's draft of the description of the executive provided the office with scant power (McDonald 1994, 171).

In late August, as the Committee of the Whole reconvened to examine the Committee of Detail's draft, the proposed presidency consisted of the following: there would be a single president elected for a seven-year term by a joint session of Congress. The president would be ineligible for reelection, would have no power of appointment or removal, and could be impeached by the House and convicted by the Supreme Court. The president would be commander-in-chief, would possess a conditional veto over Congressional legislation, and could grant pardons and reprieves.

In the final days of the Convention, several adjustments were made in these provisions and the executive office evolved into its current form. The president's enumerated powers as listed in Article II of the Constitution included commander-in-chief of the armed forces, the authority to grant pardons and reprieves, the ability to veto legislation, the power to make treaties with other nations, and the power to appoint judges, executive department heads, and ambassadors. To ensure a balance of power, the legislative and executive branches had the ability to check presidential actions. For example, only Congress could declare war, two-thirds of both Congressional houses could override a presidential veto, the Senate must confirm all treaties made by the president, and the Senate must approve presidential appointments. The House could impeach the president with the Senate serving as judge or court. The framers hoped this system of checks and balances would prevent the reign of a tyrannical executive. In addition to finalizing the executive's power, the framers discussed methods of selecting the president.

Lacking trust in the people's ability to elect the president directly and hesitating to allow existing legislative bodies to select the president, they designed the electoral college. (For a discussion of the electoral college, see the ERIC Digest *Teaching about Presidential Elections*, August 2000, by Thomas S. Vontz and William A. Nixon.)

The Changing Role of the Chief Executive. The role of the executive in the United States government has changed as office holders shaped the presidency and interpreted their powers in various ways. All members of the Constitutional Convention considered George Washington to embody the image of the American president. His leadership and commitment to the United States brought legitimacy to the newly formed government. Two of Washington's cabinet members, Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, differed in their views of the role of the government, and their clashing political philosophies

Sarah E. Drake **is a doctoral student in the School of Education and a project assistant at the Social Studies Development Center of Indiana University.** ***Thomas S. Vontz*** **is director of the Indiana Program for Law-Related Education at the Social Studies Development Center and a research associate in the Indiana University School of Education.**

have characterized leadership styles adopted by subsequent presidents.

Hamilton called for an active government, and strong leadership exhibited by such presidents as Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and Lyndon Johnson hearkens back to the Hamiltonian view of government. The charismatic personality of Franklin Roosevelt (FDR) undoubtedly enabled him to lead the United States during the Depression and World War II. FDR demonstrated strong leadership by expanding the role of the federal government through the New Deal. FDR's successor, Harry Truman, also exhibited strong leadership. Truman made tough foreign policy decisions that FDR postponed, and policymakers in the Truman administration outlined strategies of containment that defined and shaped the outcomes of the Cold War.

By contrast, the Jeffersonian style of leadership was associated with a less active government. Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, Dwight Eisenhower, and Ronald Reagan demonstrated Jeffersonian tendencies during their presidencies. Hoover, for example, initially refused to offer federal aid during the Depression because he believed the government should limit its interference in people's lives. Reagan's leadership style has been interpreted as a reaction to an excessively active government, as he sought to curtail federal programs and return power to the states.

In reaction to expanding presidential power and as a result of actions taken during the Vietnam War, Congress has attempted to limit executive authority. The 1973 War Powers Resolution assigned to the president and Congress the war-making authority supposedly intended by the Constitution. In limiting the president's authority, Congress implied that powers not possessed by the executive belonged to the legislature. Many members of Congress feared that the presidency had become too powerful in the balanced government established in the Constitution.

Today, the American president is undoubtedly a powerful figure in the United States government structure. The executive, legislative, and judicial branches act independently and interdependently to protect citizens' rights and, as Madison stated in *Federalist 51*, "enable the government to control the governed and in the next place oblige it to control itself."

World Wide Web Resources for Teaching About the Presidency. The following World Wide Web sites are recommended as valuable resources for teachers and students.

The American Experience: The Presidents This interactive PBS site features eight presidents and emphasizes their early careers, presidential politics, domestic policy, foreign affairs, legacies, and "days of decision." The site provides content information and enables students to "vote" on critical issues that dominated the respective presidential administrations. A teacher's guide and links to further resources are included as well. <www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/presidents/indexjs.html>

IPL POTUS: President of the United States This site provides background information, election results, notable events, and lists of cabinet members for each presidential administration. In addition to serving as a source of quick statistical information, this site includes historical documents from each presidency, and links to Internet biographies and other resources.
<www.ipl.org/ref/POTUS>

Character in Time: The U.S. Presidents The History Project, Inc. is in the process of developing a series of one-act plays that seek to capture each of the American presidents as a person in his time and place. This site contains information on the plays currently available for use and those in production. A description of the playwrights and subscription information are also included. <www.uspresidents.com/plays.htm>

The American Presidency – Selected Resources: An Informal Reference Guide This site serves as a host to provide connections to numerous sites relating to the presidency. It offers links for both "fun facts," primary sources, and current debates regarding the presidency. It also features links to specific information on each of the presidents.
<www.interlink-café.com/uspresidents/>

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Services (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

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